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## ALTHUSSERIAN ANONYMOUS (THE RELAPSE)

GENERICSCIENCE ALTHUSSER, DETERMINATION-IN-DER-LETZTEN-INSTANZ, MARXISM

### 1. Old versus Young Marx

I am a recovering Althusserian. For decades now I have been Althusser-free, for the most part, but we all have our lapses. The first step to becoming a recovering Althusserian is to recognize that you have no control and are unconsciously always a little bit Althusserian whether you want to be or not.

Louis Althusser is however not so much a poison as what Derrida and Stiegler and Stengers call a *pharmakon*. That is, something that is undecidable, both poison and cure. It may well be that there are good reasons, in the twenty-first century, to be an Althusserian. I am not objectively in a position to say, and in any case: by their results shall we judge them. When there is a useful Althusserian response to the Anthropocene (or whatever you want to call the current 'conjuncture') consider the matter settled. As of yet there is no such response, perhaps for reasons to be elucidated later.

Perhaps this is to judge too harshly. In what follows I want to read some essays by the 'young Althusser'. I leave it to others to account for the mature works. I want to think about what is living and dead in the Althusserian 'problematic', through a series of antinomies that he had to face. This first part deals with his essay 'On the Young Marx.' This essay is instructive, as it both sets up a method of reading Marx that we can also apply reflexively to Althusser, and also provides a useful answer to one of the key problems in Marxological thought: the relation of the young to the old (or mature) Marx.

Althusser neatly characterizes the two extant approaches of his time. In one, there are *elements* in the young Marx that *anticipate* the older one, and his thought can be read as a teleology, as always having tended towards this goal, this truth. Or: one can read the young Marx as announcing a broad, *ethical* program which is then either narrowed or even betrayed by the more *economistic* and social-scientific work of his later years. The former is a typical reading for orthodox communists of the time; the latter the characteristic program of Western Marxism and even of the New Left more broadly. Hence as Althusser wryly notes, all discussions of young and old Marx are political discussions.

Both these readings tend to focus on *elements* of the text, finding for example characteristically Hegelian or Feuerbachian elements in the young Marx, or themes submerged in the young Marx later brought out more fully in later writing. Althusser

wants to dispense with 'Hegelian', or rather bog-Hegelian readings in particular, such as the proposition that the materialist core of Marx was present in the early works but in a still idealist form.

Althusser says that "this method which is constantly judging cannot make the slightest judgment of any totality unlike itself." There is a totalizing sameness to those readings of Marx that annex him onto Hegel. If there's just a little bit of Hegel to be detected in Marx somewhere, then it becomes Hegel all the way down.

In place of all this, another method: Ideologies have to be considered structurally, as having an underlying *problematic* of different terms and their combinations. Any particular ideology also has to be thought in the *ideological field* in which it partakes. That field has determinants outside itself, in specific historical situations. Althusser wants to claim that this is the beginning of a *scientific* method for treating the ideological, rather than for merely extending ideology. This is more asserted than demonstrated, but for those inclined to the formal methods of literary analysis, this is progress. Reading is to have its *method*.

The young Marx, Althusser candidly says, writes ideology. He writes it well, but it is just an extension or permutation of the ideological field of his time. Even devout Marxocologicalists should not be embarrassed by this. Althusser: "Early Works are as inevitable and as impossible as the singular object displayed by Jarry: the skull of the child Voltaire."

One advantage of Althusser's reference of young Marx to the ideological field is that it rules out another method, more common in our time: the Great Books of the Apostolic Succession. One reads Hegel, one then reads Feuerbach (extra-credit only, he is not quite canonic), then one reads Marx — and then one reads Althusser. But as Althusser rightly insists, the Hegel that Marx read was "not the library Hegel we can meditate on in the solitude of 1960," — or 2016. The Hegel of Marx was the Hegel of the neo-Hegelian *social movement*.

In short, Marx came into a very particular ideological field, and his thought as a young writer was within a problematic determined by that field, particularly that of the left Hegelians, and even more particularly that of Feuerbach. A problematic, for Althusser is a kind of structural system through which other material can be processed. Hence Marx applied the Feuerbachian problematic to religion, as Feuerbach did, but also to political and economic ideologies, as he did not.

Interestingly, the concept of problematic becomes a way *not* to think the Hegelian totality for Althusser. A problematic is a systematic structure with rules of composition, not a unity whose essence is expressed in all its particulars. A problematic, moreover is something that thinks through you, rather than being what you think. It is in a sense *unconscious*. It calls for special methods for determining how the problematic is at work in the text. Note how the path is open already for a kind of specialized labor of textual exegesis here. Althusser: "a problematic cannot generally be read like an open book, it must be dragged from the depths." Henceforth we are with Hermes, running a gimlet eye of suspicion over the text, as if it were a symptom of what it hides.

So Marx unconsciously plays out certain permutations of a problematic. It's a theory which neatly inverts Sartre's notion of a writer's necessary freedom to commit to a project. But this presents then a special problem for accounting for how Marx broke with the ideological field of his time. In backward Germany in Marx's day, intellectuals put a special effort into thinking what was to be done but could not happen. They looked to the political revolutions of France and the industrial revolutions of England. Unable to actually produce either revolution — they *theorized* them. Most fully, in Althusser's account, not so much in Hegel but the Hegelianism of the 1830s and 1840s.

Cunningly, Althusser says that Marx *retreated* from this ideological field, rather than overcoming or surmounting it. He went back to the original problematics of the political economists and political theorists who Hegel had claimed to synthesize into his own philosophy. This is coupled with two discoveries that are *extra-philosophical*. It was Marx's experience of political radicalism in Paris, and Engels' first-hand psychogeography of Manchester capitalism, that were the key to moving forward after this retreat from Hegel. Althusser: "In France, Marx discovered the organized working class; in England, Engels discovered developed capitalism and a class struggle obeying its own laws and ignoring philosophy and philosophers."

The failure of German liberalism pushed Marx out of Germany. The bourgeois backers of his radical journalism melted away. And with that failure came the retreat from the ideological field to which they belonged. Marx's training in German idealism was not wasted, however. It provided the ability to think abstractly, which was only awaiting actual concrete things in the world that really needed to be thought.

Thus, Althusser understands Marx's thought as breaking with the ideological field of his formation, and founding a science. One might remain skeptical about the second part of this claim — the founding of a science — and still find useful the first part — the concept of the ideological field. Perhaps they are rather harder than that to exit. And what if this method were applied in turn to Althusser? What was the ideological field to which *his* work belonged? What was its underlying problematic? What historical situation gave rise to it? And closer to my own dabbings with it, what historical situation led to the uptake of Althusser in the Anglophone world in the 1970s and 80s?

To tackle the last first: the defeat of the New Left in the 70s led, among other things, to a kind of embedding in the cultural and educational apparatus of those who had dreamed of larger things. This was past the era of the Chinese, Cuban and Algerian revolutions, still the time of the Vietnam war; the time of the rise and fall of New Left activism in the west. This was perhaps not unlike the situation of the left-Hegelians in Germany in the 1840s. And perhaps with not so different results. That which could no

longer be enacted– was to be thought as a theoretical revolution instead.

If Sartre had appealed to a more committed, activist time; Althusser appealed to one of quietism, at least as far as he was read in the Anglophone world in the 70s and 80s. (The Althusserians of 1960s France were a different story). What was to be taken up was something already apparent in this brief essay on young Marx: specialized method. Althusser legitimated the scientific study of the ideological field, the search for the unconscious problematic.

This had certain benefits. It meant an insistence on certain standards for accounting for how the ideological field is structured. It also implies a certain *relative autonomy* and consistency of the ideological level. It led in practice, however, to a deepening of an academic division of labor, via which Marxist thought could accommodate itself to the disciplines. The economic, political and ideological could then be studied as separate objects, each in their own field, in increasingly diminishing contact with each other.

## 2. Superstructures versus Infrastructure

Let's look at a famous Althusser essay from the early sixties. 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' builds on Althusser's 'On the Young Marx' essay, in deciding against the various Hegelian readings of Marx. Althusser rejects the metaphors of 'turning Hegel right side-up', or 'restoring the rational kernel of dialectic without the mystical shell.' Rather, he thinks of Marxism as *replacing* Hegel's dialectic with a different problematic.

How is one to take an argument of this kind? One way would be to subject it to philological proof, a kind of scrutiny it may not actually withstand. But perhaps one can take the argument in a different vein: that one *could* replace the Hegelian dialectic with a different one, even that one *ought* to replace it. Althusser is very nervous about opportunistic or merely ideological dilutions of Marxism, and so he insists that his is a *rectification*, or a drawing out of a dialectic that Engels rather misconstrued, and that neither Marx nor Lenin had the time to write. As a party member, he could hardly appear to be reading Marx at all creatively.

Perhaps now one can see it as creative. Althusser took a cutting of Marx, taken from its German-idealist root-stock, and grafted it to a quite different problematic. One could mention here at least four coordinates of the ideological field in which that problematic resided. One would be the French social thought from Durkheim via Mauss to Levi-Straus, stretching from anthropology to linguistics. A second might be Spinoza, a third would be the distinctive philosophy of science in France centered on Gaston Bachelard. A fourth would be a version of Marxist 'orthodoxy' uninterested in the post-56 'thaw', and loyal to Lenin, Stalin – and Mao.

Of these, Spinoza is probably decisive, although neatly dove-tailing with French social thought, in the way Althusser thinks a totality that produces, among other things, subjects, rather than thinking a totality that subjects produce through their encounter with, and recognition of themselves in, an objective world. Althusser begins the new dialectic with the category of *over-determination* (borrowed in this case from psychoanalytic readings of structural linguistics). Rather than one dialectical totality, unfolding in all its complexity around a central contradiction, Althusser posits a totality with at least three kinds of contradiction that can over-determine the central one – the class struggle between labor and capital.

Of most use to me is his passing recognition that *other classes* can over-determine the contradiction between labor and capital. As is clear from Marx's political writings, from Gramsci, from Kautsky on the peasant question, the simplification of class dynamics down to two classes of Marx's *Capital* is not always helpful. The economic dynamics of capitalism might hinge on the class relation, but politics is more complicated. That class contradiction may be over-determined that of other classes. (I pushed this thesis to extreme in my *A Hacker Manifesto*).

A second over-determination comes from the *relative autonomy of the superstructures*. It may well be that forces at work in the political or ideological levels may either retard or accelerate the development of the principal economic contradiction. In the case of the Russian revolution, Althusser thinks there is an element of ideological over-determination. The working class was intensely class conscious, thanks to a militant and organized intellectual movement. This idea of the relative autonomy of the superstructures will become a crucial legitimating move for political theory and cultural studies, as we shall see.

A third over-determination take us outside the national-cultural frame so dear to Gramsci, into the space of the relations between imperial states. Taking up Lenin's thesis that the imperial system broke at its *weakest link* – the Russian empire, Althusser reads this as a third kind of over-determination. History advances 'bad side first', as Marx and Engels put it in the *Holy Family*. It was not where the capitalist infrastructure was most developed that the revolution broke out – as 'vulgar' determinist Marxists might have expected.

Thus the world-historical situation is not the product of the 'beautiful' contradiction between labor and capital alone. Strikingly, this implies a root-and-branch rethinking of Marxism itself, both of its theory, but also of its history. "One day it will be necessary to do what Marx and Engels did for utopian socialism, but this time for those still schematic-utopian forms of mass consciousness unfluenced by Marxism... a true historical study of the conditions and forms of that consciousness." And, one might add, this root-and-branch critical history is now required for the Althusserian turn as well.

The (admittedly simplified) Hegelian theory against which this is launched saw world-historical movement as a dialectic between

the sphere of needs, of civil society, versus political society, or the state and its governing Idea. In this Hegel, material life, civil society, the economy – is merely the means through which reason, embodied in the state, works itself out in history. No matter whether this was the Hegel of the Hegelians, it was the Hegel of the Marxists for whom Marx was Hegel put right-side-up. In that version, it is the other way around. The sphere of the social production of men's needs – economy – is the hidden truth of its political and economic forms. Economy is essence and the superstructures mere appearance. Althusser: "The logical destination of this temptation is the exact mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic. The only difference being that it is no longer a question of deriving the successive moments from the Idea, but from the Economy."

Even as a recovering Althusserian, I am thankful for this break Althusser makes from the metaphysics of essence and appearance. That metaphysic remains the ideological field of theories of *eternal capitalism*, in which the essence of its economy never changes, and any new feature is 'just circulation' or some other such non-thought. Althusser is the beginning of a way to think historically again, outside of the mythic grand narrative of the 'beautiful contradiction', as he calls it, which is the hidden God governing all appearances.

For Althusser, Marx's whole project is a break with exactly this dialectic. Althusser: "his concern was rather the 'anatomy' of this world and the dialectic of the mutations of this 'anatomy.' Therefore the concept of 'civil society' – the world of individual economic behavior and its ideological origin – disappears from Marx's work." In its place, a retreat from Hegel to his sources in classical political economy, such as Smith, and forward to Ricardo and others who follow Smith, and the development of a critique of the very categories through which the sphere of needs is imagined in bourgeois thought.

One might pause here to note that this set Althusserians on a course of seeing the *relations of production* as the crucial and determinate component of the economic 'instance', not the *forces of production*. This had a certain utility when expanded out into a concept of relations of production and reproduction – a pathway opened by Althusser and his students in *Reading Capital*, which paid attention to Marx's rather neglected *Capital vol. 2*. This later enabled a co-joining of Marxist and feminist concepts of how a capitalist social formation might be reproduced.

But there was a relative neglect of the *forces of production*, the study of which can't be performed on a purely philosophical level but requires some detailed inquiry into the technologies of the day. Althusser does not ask after Marx's interest in Charles Babbage's field studies in industrial technique, or his readings in German scientific materialism, where the science and engineering and their impact on the forces of production were a lively concern. This was unfortunate, given how rapidly the forces of production changed in the late twentieth century, changes those under the Althusserian spell rather neglected. And one might note here that this made the *forces of reproduction* even harder to fathom, and no connection was possible to Marxist-feminists such as Donna Haraway whose work was surely centrally connected to the question of the forces of reproduction.

Note that Althusser's metaphor is the *anatomy* of the economic, not its *metabolism*, a term Marx uses in *Capital vol. 3* that has proven very useful for green Marxism in thinking the Anthropocene. There's a sense in which whatever the merits of Althusser's influence in rescuing Marxism from economic-determinist vulgar thought, it prevented it on the other hand from not being vulgar enough, and really trying to grasp the historical development of the forces of production.

In other respects, with Althusser there was progress. The state, in this new dialectic, is not the embodiment of an Idea, but the instrument of the ruling classes. In place of the essence-appearance metaphysic, is a relation between separate and equally 'real' instances: economic, political, ideological, which relate through their structural differences rather than as expressive components of a whole. What was civil society, of the sphere of needs, becomes properly the mode of production, an historically specific form in which needs are socially met. It remains, in Marxist fashion, the determinate factor, but "in the last instance." Its effectivity may be over-determined by, among other things, the political or ideological superstructures. Indeed, Althusser asserts, "the last, lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes." In this 'dialectic,' relations are separate and external to the terms they permutate. In this case the instances (economy, polity, ideology) are each separate levels with their own internal 'contradictions' between terms, each of which is then at a meta-level (over-determination) in a relation of externality and effectivity to each other. Goodbye Hegelian dialectic – negative or not.

This might be a grand and rather ironic example of what Guy Debord and the Situationists called *détournement*: the copying and correcting of past ideas, texts, materials, from past to present, with no regard for property or propriety. But *détournement* is a topic for another time. Where Debord advocated it as a means of cultural and ideological production that abolished all claims to property and propriety, Althusser did the opposite – he established the property claims of those who held the philosophical keys to correct method.

The reason this appeared so urgent at the time takes us out of the those coordinates of the ideological field governed by academic intellectual life, and further into those governed at the time by the intellectual life of the communist party. What was at stake was a double question: who would have authority over Marxist discourse for the party? To which revolution would the party – and its intellectuals – owe allegiance?

### 3. Mao vs Khrushchev

The first footnote in Althusser's text 'On the Materialist Dialectic' (1963) is not to Marx or Hegel or Spinoza, it is to Roger Garaudy. Who the fuck was Roger Garaudy? Trust me: you don't want to know. Garaudy was the kind of hack who passed for a

'thinker' within the French Communist Party of the time (and whose later career is to ignominious to even mention). As is often the case, particularly with Marxist thinkers, the ideological field for Althusser was shaped by institutional figures and forces who do not even appear if one studies 'library Marxism' in graduate school.

Althusser's celebrated early works all happen between two world-historical events: Khrushchev's 'secret speech' of 1956, in which he revealed a tiny portion of the crimes of Stalin, and set about a partial de-Stalinization of the Communist movement. The other key event is the Sino-Soviet split, which starts to unfold from 1960, and led to break of the Chinese Communists from the Soviet 'camp by 1965.

Khrushchev's speech led to an ideological 'thaw', but also to a profound crisis for the western communist parties. A rather vacuous 'socialist humanism' became the prevailing ideology, partly inspired by a turn to the young Marx. This current saw Marxism as a *continuation* of the bourgeois enlightenment project. In some respects, this was a return to the popular front style of thinking of the inter-war years.

The Sino-Soviet split was over many things, of which ideology was probably the least important. Still, Mao did not follow the de-Stalinization line. I remember, when visiting China in 1987, that one could still find portraits of the "four beards" on the walls of official party buildings: the four being Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. Their profiles, one in front of the other, would usually face a portrait of Mao on the opposite wall. In short: Mao was the true successor in the party's Apostolic Succession, Stalin included.

The rupture between the Soviet and Chinese parties had its impact within the western communist parties as well. The Chinese revolution had appeared as a vindication of at least one idea of Lenin's: that imperialism would break at its 'weakest links' — a form of over-determination in the Althusserian dialectic. The Chinese appeared to be trying to avoid the bureaucratization of their revolution. They seemed to want to do something different to the building of a massive heavy industry that simply reproduced under socialist conditions the same alienated mass labor as happened under capitalism.

As with enthusiasm for the Russian revolution, western enthusiasm for the Chinese revolution was based on very limited information. Since taking power in 1949 Mao appeared to have reformed agriculture, combatted illiteracy, embarked on a huge, labor-intensive program of national reconstruction, all with an aura of egalitarianism and purpose. The human costs of all of which were apparent to almost nobody in the west, whether on the right or the left — the Situationist René Viénet and his comrades excepted.

When the split opened up between the Soviets and China, not a few western communists opted to support China, either within the mainstream communist party, or by leaving it. In France, the party made the mistake of expelling the 'Maoists' *en bloc*, enabling them to swiftly set up a rival party of not negligible size. While there would be splits and factions, Maoism would be a strong current on the French left — much more so than in many other western countries.

Althusser did not leave the pro-Soviet Communist Party of France. His relation to the party and to China question is a rather subtle one. Certainly, 'young Althusser' texts can be read as formulating, at a very high level of sophistication a Maoist 'line' of sorts, or at the very least one opposed to the politics and culture of the Soviet thaw. Certainly several key students of his were active in one or other Maoist formation.

It is also possible to read Althusser, strangely enough, through what is usually thought of as the 'voluntarism' inherent in Lenin, Stalin and Mao's thought, best expressed in the latter's slogan "put politics in command." This would be the idea, even the practice, of considering either ideological propagandizing or political mobilization as the lever via which the whole social formation would be transformed, as in Stalin's own Cultural Revolution or later as Mao's 'Great Leap Forward'. The economic, as the realm of needs, needs a force from without to transform it.

Hence: "a revolution in the structure does not *ipso facto* modify the existing superstructures and particularly the ideologies at one blow." Here Althusser appears to complement the Maoist critique of what had gone wrong in the Soviet Union: That the revolution had not been ideologically and politically vigilant enough. Moreover "the new society produced by the revolution may itself ensure the survival, that is the reactivation, of older elements through... the forms of its new superstructures..."

Is it too much to see here an echo of Stalin's darkest thesis, that of the 'sharpening of contradictions' *after* the revolution? Not to mention Mao's extension of it to constant mobilizations which, depending on your point of view, were aimed either at preventing the formation of a counter-revolutionary superstructure — or were meant merely to keep Mao the old tyrant in power.

Ideas travel in strange ways. However much Althusser may (or may not) have meant his position to be a Maoist one (a 'superstructuralism' but hardly a voluntarism) it ended up being something quite different, particularly in the Anglophone world: a legitimization for the 'long march' through the superstructures of a generation of intellectuals, fighting the good fight in the academy, or the media, or the arts, in imaginative but rarely any actual contact with, organized labor.

While in this essay I am critical of the legacy of Althusser *today*, I want to pay tribute nevertheless to those for whom his texts were one source of inspiration for a life of militancy, in France and elsewhere, often of considerable personal sacrifice. These are people whose names are only known to a few, who gave up lives that were in some cases of high privilege, to work sometimes under assumed names in factories or industrial towns. They could be rather dour and prickly — the basis in fact for Deleuze and Guattari's portrait of the 'sad militant'. But particularly in the 'red decade' in France (1966-1976) they did their best. For me that is

always to be remembered with honor.

#### 4. Academy and Party

This might then be a thumbnail of the ideological field into which Althusser made his most influential interventions. It need only be added that his institutional location was not an insignificant one: the École Normale Supérieure (ÉNS). He taught at the absolute apex of a rather rigidly hierarchical educational system. The Grandes écoles in France produce the elite in each of their respective fields, in the case of the ÉNS – intellectuals. Sartre had been a *normalien* before him, as were Derrida and Foucault, in whose training Althusser had a hand.

A striking number of western Marxists were 'outsiders' of one kind or another, marked by difference. Even the archetypal 'French intellectual' Sartre was actually from Alsace. Several were German-speaking Jews. Althusser was a *pied noir* – a person of white French background born in Algeria. But more significant to our story is Althusser's *cognitive difference*. He suffered periodic episodes of depression (and according to Eric Hobsbawm, quite extreme mania). That he murdered his wife while in an irrational state ought not to go unmentioned. I note this also because of the irony that Althusser is one of the sources for a kind of universalist and rationalist stand in continental philosophy, and yet could not have been further outside the personae of the 'universal rational man.'

And yet Althusser was also a 'insider', a Marxist and at the lofty ENS, teaching philosophy, in a country *where philosophy actually matters*. Unlike in the Anglophone world, philosophy is embedded within the French school curriculum. It informs a wide range of ideological processes. While Althusser would reject some of Gramsci's ways of formulating the problem, he would surely have understood the minor but not-insignificant role of philosophy in sustaining what for Gramsci would be called *hegemony*.

Althusser contributed to a kind of counter-hegemonic base-building which produced in France for a time a quite interesting anti-capitalist cultural sphere. Althusser created an intellectual base for a Marxism that did not need the Communist Party to authorize it, which was one of the conditions of possibility for a non-communist intellectual left which could almost endure what Felix Guattari called the 'winter years' of the 1980s.

The real significance of Althusser is in the transition from a Marxism of the party to a Marxism of the academy. The means via which he got Marx from one to the other are now moot. It is rather like the fable of Captain Cook's axe: first the handle was lost and replaced, then the head was lost and replaced, and yet it remains Captain Cook's axe. Curiously, this severing of Marx from the actual party was in very different fashions also the goal of the Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness* and the Sartre of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In the first case, the party was strong enough to shut this rival down, in the latter case to ignore it. But Althusser of the ÉNS managed to establish a parallel kind of authority over Marxism, independent of the party, and which would perhaps even outlive it.

Some elements of the text 'On the Materialist Dialectic: On the Unevenness of Origins' might help explain this move. It is among other things an ur-text for the notion of a capitalized 'Theory'. In Althusser, this Theory was supposed to be the guarantee of the scientific character of Marxism, of its break with ideology, and a defense against ideological back-sliding. It was not to be. It never became an infallible debugger of method. Rather, we have had to learn to live with what Stuart Hall famously called a Marxism without guarantees.

Althusser stressed the break between Hegel and Marx. He also – rather fatefully – offered a pluralist rather than a mono-causal philosophy of history. (Remember here the three kinds of over-determination). Having defended this against the Hegelians, in this text he shored up the other flank, and defended this limited pluralism against what he calls a "hyper-empiricism." Once one has more than one historical dialectic – why not lots and lots and lots?

The answer is to advance a *theoretical practice*. Here Althusser claims to follow Lenin, in the insistence that without correct revolutionary theory, there can be no correct revolutionary practice. What he adds is that the production of that *theory is itself its own kind of practice*. If the Leninists had professionalized political practice, making it a specialized form of labor, Althusser makes theoretical practice a specialized practice.

Althusser: "ideology is not always taken seriously as an existing practice. But to recognize this is the indispensable prior condition for any theory of ideology." Oddly enough, one of Althusser's precursors here is Bogdanov, for whom ideologies were products of real, material practices whose function was to motivate and coordinate labor. Althusser (and his student Dominique Lecourt) are orthodox, even vigilant Leninists in their hostility to Bogdanov, but it is curious that a selection of Bogdanov did appear in the series Althusser edited. Certainly Bogdanov, not Lenin, was Althusser's precursor in breaking with Hegelian interpretations of Marx!

Althusser: "The theoretical practice of a science is always completely distinct from the ideological theoretical practice of its prehistory: this distinction takes the form of a 'qualitative' theoretical and historical discontinuity which I shall follow Bachelard in calling an 'epistemological break.'" There is both the beginnings of something here but a lack of follow through. A more practical study of how sciences constitute themselves in and against an ideological field would seem here to be an excellent suggestion.

But Althusser will not be a return towards a genuine study of science, in the manner of JD Bernal or Joseph Needham. Nor is he a precursor to science studies as it will later flower. Rather, he gets stuck at the level of asserting a merely formal break between

a science and the ideology which precedes and surrounds it. There will be those in science studies who will pass over their debts to the Marxism of Bernal and Needham by loudly declaiming their distance from this Marxism of Althusser.

What decides for the science of Marxism is Theory, "none other than dialectical materialism," although a rather different one to the diamat constructed out of random bits of Marx and Engels by Althusser's Soviet counterparts. It is to decide *in advance* what the dialectic is, before the encounter in a given investigation of a new situation or problem. Before beginning any investigation, or any practice, researchers "need Theory, that is, the materialist dialectic, as the sole method that can anticipate their theoretical practice by drawing up its formal conditions." One could juxtapose this not just to Needham, but also to Bogdanov, at least as I read them. In their hands, theory is a matter of extracting concepts (the 'dialectic') from particular practices of the production of empirical and scientific knowledge, and then the speculative testing and adaptation of them to other fields.

In other words, theirs is a genuine pluralism, within a general speculative method, but also with specific empirical tests of the validity of that method *in each domain of knowledge production*. In short, Althusser wants democratic centralism – the party of Theory's decision is final – whereas Bogdanov and Needham are more 'syndicalist' in their approach to the comradely cooperation of knowledge.

Althusser's is not quite as ambitious a view as that which Plekhanov took over from Engels, in which a dialectic can be applied even to the natural sciences. Althusser's ambitions do not extend that far. But he does appear to want a Theory that can legislate outside the bounds of the natural sciences. He is particularly on his guard (as Leninist always are) against *spontaneity*, particularly among new-fangled practices of the production of knowledge. The new social sciences and humanities fields in particular are not to think they are self-legislating – *autonomous*.

The most ambitious claim of this text is to ground the general method of a *theoretical practice*. This comes, curiously, out of a gentle but thorough critique of Mao's text 'On Contradiction'. What follows strikingly is not so much a theory as a *metaphor*. Theoretical practice is to be understood on the metaphor of production in general, but in a rather peculiar way. The production of knowledge starts with Generality I: with general concepts, the existing ones of ideology, as *raw material*. They are transformed by the labor of Generality II. These are the *means of production*, more or less contradictory, of the production of knowledge of a given moment. The work of Generality II on Generality I produces knowledge as specified concepts, a concrete generality. In short: "theoretical practice produces Generalities III by the work of Generality II on Generality I.

It should be apparent at once that this is metaphorical. Nothing concrete about the labor of the production of knowledge appears here at all. Althusser even says "if we abstract from men in these means of production for the time being..." But the abstraction never ends. What follows is then the dogmatic assertion that there is an epistemological break between Generality I and Generalities III, guaranteed by the vigilance of Theory over the transformative work of Generality II. And what results is not the concrete-as-such, but the concrete in thought. The criteria of valid knowledge are all internal to the theoretical procedure, understood metaphorically to be a labor procedure. True knowledge is that which Theory guarantees, *and no other*. It is the *theoretical concrete* which is knowledge.

One could mount an internal critique of this version of what Marxist Theory ought to be doing. But I think it more useful to put it into the ideological field, and ask: what 'work' was it doing at large? To my mind, Althusser is trying to set up a procedure for the coordination and validation of correct Marxist 'practice' within the division of labor of the university, or even the ideological apparatuses writ large. One that appears to parallel and supplement that of the party, but which actually replaces it.

This has two aspects. One is the replacement of the authority of the Party with that of Theory. To some extent the controversy that this aroused is moot, given the decline of that very Party, and the marginal status of those that would try to reproduce it. Interestingly, by the time we get to the later work of Althusser's student Alain Badiou, there are four kinds of event which produce the subject and its truth, of which politics is only one, not dominant one.

The other aspect is the question of the coordination of different kinds of knowledge that might claim to be part of a larger Marxist project within the university. This is rather more interesting. It is if anything an even more significant problem today. Althusser's solution is a 'democratic centralist' one, a para-Party called Theory, which has both legislative, judicial (and policing) power as to what constitutes knowledge, at least outside the domain of the natural sciences. It is as opposed to 'spontaneous' theories and their lateral, transversal flow between sites of work as the Leninist party was to all forms of spontaneity, whether it be in the style of Rosa Luxemburg, or Antoine Pannekoek, or Alexander Bogdanov.

Not surprisingly, given the institutional context of the ENS and French hegemonic culture more generally, this para-Party is essentially that of *philosophy*. Marxist philosophy will legislate, judge and police all the other forms of knowledge in a remarkably similar way to how non-Marxist philosophy has always considered itself to have such powers in the French context. The counter-hegemonic (in Gramsci's terms) is a mirror of the hegemonic. It does not have its own form. In this regard, and to make an extreme provocation, we have to conclude that Althusserianism was a kind of *reformism* in the domain of knowledge and culture. Unlike, for example, Bogdanov and the Situationists, in their rather different ways, there is no imagining here of a different *form* for a counter-production of knowledge.

Althusser's metaphoric approach to the question of knowledge production led in at least two different directions. One was an even more hyperbolic rationalism, but more on that later. The other was to make the metaphor more 'real', in the sense of

examining actual, material processes of the production of knowledge, and in particular of those kinds of knowledge which seem to have direct power-effects. This is the path of Michel Foucault. Granted, this approach leans as much on Nietzsche's diagnoses of the will to power in forms of knowledge or ideology. And granted, this in many ways became a new kind of *doxa* in the humanities, where 'power' could be found everywhere and nowhere.

Still: there seems to me something positive in this general procedure, and one with more affinity for Marx than might be at first apparent. A Marxist approach to knowledge, and in fact even of natural scientific knowledge, should enquire into the material practices of its production, and moreover, should see itself within the limits of those means of production and not at some Archimedean point outside of them. Much of science studies actually took this kind of trajectory.

Here we have to mention Althusser's very curt dismissal of any approach (such as that of Bogdanov) which starts from the reality of that which the apparatus and labor of knowledge produces. Althusser simply asserts that if one starts from sensation, even in this historically grounded way, one has no way of filtering in advance what is ideological from it, and thus of producing a science. The reply to this is obvious: Althusser's rationalism has no such procedure either. It is simply *asserted* that the vigilance of Theory will perform this miracle, and do so in a universal way.

But why not a method for all the sciences? Particularly those that impinge most heavily on us. Here what might be worth developing, out of Bogdanov and Needham, or out of Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, might be a concrete, historical, specific approach to the actual production of knowledge in both natural and human sciences. What we need is not something like Mao's 'On Contradiction', to legislate as Theory for all of knowledge. What we need is many versions of *Capital*, actual critical accounts of other kinds of knowledge, *particularly of the forces of their production*, besides political economy. Althusser would of course consider this a "hyper-empiricism."

If Althusser has merit still today, it is in his sly way of always asking: what is at stake in the politics of knowledge at any given world-historical moment? Let's quote here how he defined his own moment: "what will later be called by a name which does not exist as yet... when in the struggle for peaceful co-existence the first revolutionary forms are appearing in certain so-called under-developed countries out of their struggles for national independence." These are not those times. The capitalist west no longer confronts two socialist camps, one sprung from the colonized world. Rather, I take the defining feature of the conjuncture to be a now-globally victorious regime of commodified production to be confronting the limits imposed by its own destabilizing of the metabolic processes of the planet itself.

It turns out there are resources for thinking such a moment in the Marxist tradition, from Marx's own concept of *metabolic rift*, to Bogdanov's *tektology*, Bataille's *general economy*, Asger Jorn's *ornamentation*, or Sartre's *practico-inert*. But one might yet retain from Althusser the break from the Hegelian ideological field, to the extent that it saw labor as in a dialectic of spiritualizing nature, imbuing it with rational form, and subsuming nature into teleological project. Where Adorno reversed the Hegelian dialectic and ended up with nothing but the consolation of aesthetics, Althusser replaced it with one that at least gestured in a formal way to the problem of how to organize labor and knowledge.

## 5. Althusser versus Western Marxism

The thing about being a recovering Althusserian is that one can't help remembering the good times. Being on Althusser really does feel great. It makes certain problems disappear. For example, one is no longer trapped in the oppressive totality of Hegelian Marxism, and yet nor does one have to return to the world of 'economistic' Marxism. One can fly free from all that! (Ah, but as in any addiction narrative, there's a price to pay.)

So on the plus side, the problematic is no longer constrained by those readings of Marx that see him as essentially putting the Hegelian dialectic back on its feet, or retrieving its rational kernel from its mystical shell. Althusser's essay on the young Marx already opens up this dimension. But he is an alternative also to those western Marxists who, one way or another, tempered their Hegelianism with a dose of Kierkegaard.

This came in a lot of favors. Lukacs centered his Hegelian totality-in-process on the proletariat as universal subject-object, which frees itself from reification and acts on and as the totality. But even here there is something of a Kierkegaardian irrationality about the proletariat in action, a kind of revolutionary *leap of faith*. It is a figure that will recur in various ways in Sartre, Badiou and Zizek. Adorno and Sartre, in rather different ways, cut their Hegel with even more Kierkegaard to prevent Lukacs' totality from self-closure. In Sartre, individuals only ever temporarily subsume themselves into the movement of the totality. In Adorno the dialectic itself is to attend to the unrecoverable fragment. It twists away from the extorted reconciliation of exchange value.

Walter Benjamin's relation to Kierkegaard is complicated, but let's just say that Althusser was most certainly an alternative to taking too many hits of Benjamin, wherein history is only ever *allegorically* present, in the form of fragments that are shot through with a messianic time. All of these Marxisms had a tendency to reduce everything to commodification and its attendant effects: *reification*, *extorted reconciliation*, *inter-passivity*. Either history had become the bad totality of exchange, as in Adorno, or the good totality perpetually postponed where the rational meets the real, as in Sartre.

The Althusserian decision against Hegel and Kierkegaard with Marx comes at a price, however. One is done with totalities and fragments, but has to contend instead with the straying apart from one another of the three (or four) levels of the social formation.



This shows up in three post-Althusserian tendencies. One is that version of theory which I think has to be called 'Jacobin Marxism'. This is particularly clear in some of Althusser's students, such as Nicos Poulantzas, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Ranciere, and on into other work such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. The feature of this tendency is to isolate Politics with a capital-P as the decisive level or instance of the social formation, at the expense of any larger sense of a political economy. Politics becomes absolutely autonomous and even ontologically prior.

A second tendency was cultural studies. In rather different ways, cultural theorists from Stuart Hall to Judith Butler took off from Althusser's famous essay on 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses' and used it to legitimate the study of the ideological (or cultural) as an autonomous sphere with its own materiality and formal laws — to be understood using the tools of semiotics and rhetoric. It was even imagined that the cultural could in some sense lead revolutionary change while economic struggle stagnated.

A third tendency one could call Hyper-Rationalism. There are three kinds of regional knowledge in Althusser, corresponding to the three relatively autonomous levels within the social formation of the economic, the political and the ideological. But philosophy stands apart, legislating for what constitutes scientific knowledge in all domains — indeed for any science. What marks the difference between an ideology and a science is that the former produces subjects who misrecognize themselves in it, while sciences do not. Althusserian rationalist epistemology becomes mathematics as ontology in his student, Alain Badiou, which becomes the speculative realism of *his* student, Quentin Meillassoux.

All of these tendencies seem to me to still be dependent on Althusser and to point away from the two crucial encounters in our own times. Encounters for which neither Hegelian or Kierkegaardian nor economicist not even Althusserian Marxism are all that adept. One is the technical transformation of the forces of production and reproduction. The other is the metabolic rift opened up by the application of those forces, via the private property form, on a planetary scale. For that we have to look elsewhere, once we have weaned ourselves off Althusser, and certain other habits of thought. Habits which, like all addictions, reproduce themselves within our thought and within institutionalized discourse in pursuit of their own necessity, regardless of what takes place in the world.

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